

Leo Strauss

The Assembly of Women



This play begins like the *Acharnians* and the *Clouds* with a soliloquy by the character who is responsible for the design that issues in the action of the play. Yet Praxagora is more unambiguously the initiator than Dikaiopolis and Strepsiades, for Dikaiopolis' design presupposes Amphytheos' intervention, and Strepsiades' design is not achieved without the intervention of the Clouds. Praxagora reminds us of Lysistrata, who also opens the play whose heroine she is with a soliloquy, but Lysistrata's soliloquy is unusually brief. Like Lysistrata, Praxagora waits for her fellow women, but her opening utterance rises more above her situation than do the opening utterances of any other characters. She invokes a lamp that she carries and that is to give signals to her fellows: The light of the lamp is the only light that shines on the women's secrets, their secret pleasures—their intimacies as well as their thefts—on secrets that must be concealed from the sun; the man-made lamp sees what neither the sun nor the moon sees. Praxagora as it were calls on the art that corrects the law. The lamp will also be witness to the execution of the designs that the women have decided on some time ago. The women decided to assemble at night in order to occupy, disguised as men, the seats of the Assembly before day breaks. Praxagora has been waiting for her friends, but unlike Lysistrata she is not annoyed by their keeping her waiting because she knows how difficult it is for them to leave their houses at night without their husbands knowing it; since there is now peace, their husbands are not away on military service. The other women (all of them married and townspeople) appear in groups or by themselves. When they are all assembled, Praxagora asks them to sit down so that she can find out from them whether they have prepared themselves in accordance with the decision of the preceding women's assembly, so that they will look in today's Assembly altogether like men. They do not yet look entirely like men—for instance,

they have not yet put on the beards that they brought with them—for otherwise they might have difficulty in recognizing one another. After they have passed the examination satisfactorily, Praxagora turns to the business that they must transact before the Assembly opens at daybreak. They must again face the enormity of the action that they have decided to perform today: to take over the affairs of the city in the interest of the city. In order to succeed, they must rehearse what they are going to do and say in the Assembly. The rehearsal is necessary since, with the exception of Praxagora, the women lack experience in how to behave in the Assembly (242–44). As the women make mistakes, i.e., reveal their being women, in particular by swearing by goddesses by whom only women swear, Praxagora gives them a specimen of how one must speak in the Assembly on behalf of the women. After having prayed to the gods that they prosper the decisions of the Assembly, she speaks of the poor quality of the rulers of the city, a defect owing to the poor quality of the *demos*: The city was better off during the period when there were no Assemblies. Everyone thinks only of his own interest, no one of the common good. The city can still be saved if the Assembly hands over the city to the women, who administer the households well enough. The women are of better character than the men: They follow in every respect the ancient law and ancient practice, whereas the men—at least the Athenian men—are eager to innovate even if the present practice is perfectly sound. Accordingly Praxagora urges the Athenian men to hand the city over to the women, without asking the women what they will do after they have come to power. Their qualities as mothers and administrators of the households give a sufficient guarantee. In particular they are so good at cheating that they can not be cheated. (How good they are at cheating they show by their present action.) The good rulers, as Praxagora conceives of them, follow the ancient law and are benevolent deceivers. After having answered some questions regarding her and the other women's conduct in the Assembly, Praxagora orders them all to put on garb of men and march like men to the Assembly in a hurry: If they do not arrive in time, they will not get the assemblymen's pay. Since the women must act like men, they must become concerned like men with private gain (cf. 205–7).

There is a certain similarity between Praxagora's proposal and Lysistrata's proposal (*Lysistrata* 493–95), but what Lysistrata tried to achieve by force, Praxagora, true to her name, tries to achieve by talking or by fraud. Above all, Lysistrata's objective is much more limited than Praxagora's. Lysistrata wishes to bring about peace; Praxagora wishes to bring

about an unheard-of change of regime. What is true of Lysistrate's design is true of the designs that animate the actions of all the other plays hitherto discussed, with the exception of the *Birds*; all those designs lack the breadth of Praxagora's design. The breadth of Praxagora's design is reflected in the breadth of the observation with which she opens the play.

With the exception of Praxagora and two others, the women form themselves into a chorus before our eyes, just as in the *Birds* the chorus formed itself on the stage. After they have been reminded of the risk they run if they are found out, one half of the chorus sings as if it consisted of men marching to the Assembly, eager to receive the pay. The women relapse once into revealing that they are women. The second half of the chorus, pretending to consist of men from the countryside, praises the good old times when the pay was small and citizens did not perform their civic duties for the sake of the pay. Neither half of the chorus complains about old age: They may succeed in playing men, but they will not succeed in playing old men.

After the women have left the place in front of Praxagora's house where they had assembled, Blepyros, Praxagora's husband, appears. He is bewildered by the absence of his wife, for it is almost dawn. He noticed his wife's absence because he needed his shoes and his cloak, and he needed these things because he is under urgent pressure to ease himself. He has no choice but to put on his wife's dress and her slippers. His wife's voluntary disguise forces him into an involuntary disguise. He is not worried about how he looks, for it is still dark; therefore he can also sit down anywhere. Reflecting in a manner reminiscent of Strepsiades on the root of his discomfort, he curses himself for having taken a wife when already being an old man; she is likely to have gone out on an amorous adventure. His moanings awaken a neighbor. Thus his disgraceful discomfort will not even remain secret. Fortunately for him the neighbor suffers from the same discomfort as he, at least to the extent that his wife too has disappeared, taking with her his cloak and shoes. The neighbor consoles himself or Blepyros with the thought that his wife may have been invited to breakfast by one of her women friends. Both men are eager to go to the Assembly, but they are prevented from doing so, the neighbor because he possesses only a single cloak and Blepyros because he suffers from constipation, which delays his easing himself. Despairing of all human help he prays to the goddess who assists women in childbirth that she prevent his becoming a nightstool belonging in comedy. His circumstances compel him to give much more thought to his digestion than to his wife. He

has barely succeeded with infinite ado in getting rid of his trouble and is about to rise again when Chremes appears, returning from the Assembly, which has ended. Blepyros' session has lasted as long as the session of the Assembly. While Praxagora, as we shall soon see, has reached the highest height to which human beings in cities can rise, her husband has reached the lowest low. What is united in the dung beetle is divided between Praxagora and Blepyros in such a way that Blepyros comes closer to the goal of its lowest aspiration than Praxagora comes to the goal of its highest aspiration. Blepyros' is the most ridiculous situation in which we find any Aristophanean character, as appears with perfect clarity if we look at it, as we must, in the light of the contemporary situation of his wife. The ridiculous *par excellence*, we suggested, is pretense or boasting. Blepyros reminds us in the most drastic manner that there is a kind of the ridiculous that has no relation whatever to boasting, unless one finds that his having married a young wife constituted an act of boasting. This other kind of the ridiculous is present in all comedies and in particular in most, if not all, heroes or heroines. Surely neither Dikaiopolis, nor the sausage seller, nor Euelpides, nor Lysistrata is a boaster. Blepyros—an old man who spends on the toilet seat the time during which his young wife becomes the ruler of the city, and therewith also his ruler—is ridiculous because he suffers from a kind of helplessness or ineptitude that does not arouse compassion. He is aware of the ridiculous character of the situation: He fears that he will become an object belonging in comedy (371). While he knows that he is ridiculous he does not, like Trygaios, joke about himself. He is the only character of the play who swears "by Dionysos" (344, 357, 422). What connects Blepyros, in contradistinction to Praxagora in particular, with the comic poet is the fact that the comic poet too can not help becoming a laughingstock: In reading the plays we laugh not only with Aristophanes and through his agency but also at him; the inventor of the mad conceits of Strepsiades and all the rest must partake of their madness to some extent. Everyone can see what protection this inevitable concomitant of comedy affords to its author.

Chremes is as surprised as the neighbor was by Blepyros' having put on his wife's dress; Blepyros tells him that he put it on by accident in the dark; he obviously does not wish to be laughed at. He prevents further embarrassing questions by asking Chremes where he was coming from and learns from him that he came from the Assembly. Chremes tells him that today's Assembly was attended by more human beings than any other. The citizens assembled looked like shoemakers, since they were pale-

faced. In addition, they had assembled at an unusually early hour so that those who came later could not be admitted. Chremes traces this feature of today's Assembly to the fact that the subject of deliberation was the salvation of the city. The Assembly shouted down the first speaker because he could not save himself, let alone the city. The second speaker—a needy fellow with a threadbare cloak—made the democratic proposal that the fullers and tanners be compelled to supply the needy with warm robes and warm lodging places. Blepyros suggests that a similar obligation might usefully be imposed on the dealers in grouts. In other words, it would be fair to impose the care of the needy on those who supply men's most urgent needs. It is obvious that the second speaker's proposal for the salvation of the city was dictated by his own inability to save himself. Entirely different was the case of the third and last speaker, a handsome youth with a pale complexion. He proposed that one ought to hand over the city to the women. The proposal was greeted with applause by the multitude of shoemakers, but booed by the rural population; yet the shoemakers were in the majority. Blepyros agrees with the rural opposition. We see that Praxagora was entirely successful. The only failure that one might discern is that the women looked pale despite all their efforts to become tanned (59–64). The third speaker justified his proposal by speaking of the vices of men and the virtues of women. He praised the women for their ability to keep secrets, an ability so strikingly demonstrated today, and for their reliability and honesty in their dealings with one another. Praxagora is silent about that virtue of women on which she had laid the greatest stress in her rehearsal speech, viz., their adherence to the ancient or their conservatism. In fact, the chief reason why her proposal was accepted in the Assembly was that rule of women is the only thing that never existed in the city. There are various ways in which one can reconcile this contradiction between the rehearsal speech and the Assembly speech. Since Praxagora knew that her proposal would be adopted by an overwhelming majority, she did not care particularly whether her conclusion agreed with her premise, especially in a rehearsal. Besides, the entirely new order as the most reasonable order is the order according to nature, but nature is more ancient than any human contrivance. Finally, if adherence to ancient law and ancient practice is the greatest virtue, and if women surpass men in this respect, the ancient law contradicts itself by subordinating the women to the men. Chremes is quite satisfied with the new order. Blepyros, who approves of all innovations that increase his comfort, has only one objection: If the women rule, they can coerce their husbands into ful-

filling their marital duties, and compulsory cohabitation belongs among the most terrible things. Chremes leaves Blepyros with the observation that if such cohabitation is useful to the city, every man must practice it. Perhaps Chremes is not quite as old and decrepit as Blepyros.

The chorus, i.e., the women, return from the Assembly. They are still disguised as men and still exert themselves to march like men; the success of this morning's action depends on its being believed that the gynaeocracy was voted in by the male citizens. The chorus stops in front of the house of Praxagora, *the* she-general. Partly spontaneously and partly at the behest of Praxagora, who comes home shortly after them, they get rid of as much as possible of their disguise. Praxagora is eager to enter her house and to return her husband's things before he sees them. The women regard themselves entirely as the subjects of Praxagora, the cleverest woman they have ever seen. Praxagora in her turn assures them that she will make use of all of them as her councilors.

When about to enter her house, Praxagora is met by her husband, who asks her whence she comes. In the ensuing conversation Praxagora is still dressed as a man and her husband as a woman. She replies, "What difference does it make to you?", i.e., she replies foolishly, as Blepyros tells her. For, granted that in her new position she no longer owes him any account of her goings and comings, she can not yet know of her new position unless she has attended the Assembly, and she can not admit that she did that. Blepyros thinks of course that she might have been with a lover. Praxagora refutes this suspicion by an observation that implies that Blepyros is not too familiar with her amorous habits. She explains her stealthy disappearance with his things by a brazen lie that could easily have been found out. Blepyros knows from his neighbor that Praxagora is not the only woman who left her house with her husband's things, and he knows from Chremes that most of the citizens in today's Assembly were strikingly pale-faced. However this may be, he acts as if he did not think it profitable to probe into his wife's secret too deeply. He points out to her that through her fault he has been unable to attend the Assembly and tells her that the Assembly has decided to hand over the city to the women. Praxagora is only moderately surprised. Her response to the amazing news is that "by Aphrodite" the city will be blessed from now on. When Blepyros asks her for her reason, he gives her an opportunity to state how the women, or rather she herself, will use the newly acquired power.

Praxagora no longer speaks about women's superior goodness. We recall that the denial of women's goodness, or at least the assertion that

women are inferior to men, was a most important link between Euripides and the ancient law.⁸⁶ By asserting the superiority of women, Praxagora had tacitly turned not only against the ancient law but against Euripides as well. Women's superiority supplied them with their title to rule. What is important now is that by virtue of their goodness they will establish an order in which everyone will be good. For instance, there will no longer be sycophants. Blepyros, who hitherto lived from sycophancy, regards this as a calamity. Above all, in the new order no one will envy his neighbor, for no one will be poor. Chremes approves entirely of Praxagora's goal, but is doubtful whether it can be achieved. Praxagora is sure that she can show its feasibility so that Chremes will be satisfied and her husband will be silenced. The chorus encourages her to use her powers in defense of women by proving the beneficence of the entirely novel scheme—novel not only in deed but in speech as well. It reminds her that the spectators love novelty as well as quickness; they detest the old and the slow, i.e., they detest moderation. Thereupon Praxagora discloses that this precisely is her greatest fear: The spectators may be averse to her scheme because of their too strong adherence to the ancient. (This fear had induced her earlier to recommend the rule of women on the ground that women adhere more to the ancient than men do.) Blepyros assures her that she has no reason to be downhearted on that score: Precisely the contempt of the ancient is the sole starting point of Athenian deliberations. The starting point of the new order is the simple rejection of the equation of the good with the ancient. Praxagora goes much beyond Peisthetairos, who at least ostensibly tried to restore the most ancient order and who, besides, did not bring about his radical change in Athens. In her way Praxagora is as radical as the Unjust Speech, but since she intends a change beneficial to the city, a political change, she is inspired by justice.

The novel scheme that Praxagora presents in the exchange with Blepyros and Chremes is altogether her own; it has been thought out without the benefit of counsel from the other women. Praxagora talks as if she were the sole ruler or legislator of Athens (594, 597, 673 ff.) and she is so in fact: Her official status as general reveals even less of her position than that status did in the case of Perikles. Her novel scheme is entirely lawful since the Assembly, which was lawfully assembled and lawfully consisted of male citizens only, entrusted the rule over the city to the women and elected Praxagora general; and the women in their turn acquiesce and more than acquiesce in Praxagora's supremacy. According to Praxagora, the women in their goodness will make the men good, not by their exam-

ple, but by abolishing the causes for badness. All possessions will be in common among the citizens: There will no longer be poor and rich; there will be one way of life for all. From this common property the women, famous for their thrifty and sound administration of the households, will supply the men with food and everything else they need: There will be no motive or opportunity for stealing or cheating. This change seems indeed to follow necessarily from the gynaeocracy: Since the women are henceforth to take care of the city, they can no longer take care of individual households. They can not impose on the men the duties formerly fulfilled by the women without having to fear instant revolt; there is no way but to transform the city into a single household. The community of goods or the abolition of private households demands a no less profound change regarding sexual relations. There must be community of women as well. In this sphere however a difficulty arises that did not arise in regard to property: Equality of women as objects of men's desires is not possible, given the inequality of women in beauty. For this reason and related ones the discussion of the community of women is about twice as long as the discussion of the community of property. Praxagora overcomes the difficulty caused by the natural inequality of women by a law that makes all women equal through giving a priority to the ugly ones: No man can enjoy a beautiful woman before he has cohabited with an ugly one. Praxagora, one might say, replaces natural inequality by legal equality.⁸⁷ Yet, Blepyros objects, this arrangement so fair to ugly and old women is unfair to old men, whose fate will at any rate be worse in the new order in which they will have no money to buy girls' favors. Praxagora silences her husband by laying down the law that women may not sleep with beautiful (and young) men before they have gratified the ugly (and old) ones. She points out that this arrangement is democratic, for it makes ridiculous the stately or pompous. This remark is helpful for a better understanding of her whole scheme. Gynaeocracy itself is a consequence of the democratic premise when qualified by the further premise that the two sexes are unequal; these two premises lead to the question of which sex is the most egalitarian and therefore deserves to rule, a question that can not but be answered in favor of the female sex: Every woman competes in a way with every other woman, but not every man competes with every other man. Blepyros sees yet another difficulty: Under the new order how can one know one's children? (Nothing is known of Blepyros' and Praxagora's having children.) Praxagora leaves no doubt that the community of women requires community of children: The

younger generation will regard all men of the older generation as their fathers. There is no reason to fear that this will lead to widespread father-beating and father-killing: Everyone seeing an older man beaten by a younger man will come to the older man's help for fear that it may be his own father who is being beaten. Praxagora may thus supply a sufficient protection against father-beating; she surely does not supply a sufficient protection against incest becoming customary in the new order. On the contrary, since in the new order children and parents do not know each other, and the younger people are compelled by law to cohabit with the older ones, incest between parents and children becomes undetectable and lawful (cf. 1041-42). The prohibition against incest being one of the fundamental requirements of the city, Praxagora effects a change that is much more radical than the change effected by Peisthetairos. The fact that Blepyros and Chremes do not become concerned with the issue of incest does not prove that the author of the *Clouds* was not aware of it. The order established by Praxagora is a city without households or families. Blepyros, who for all we know may not be concerned with the issue of incest because he has no children, is concerned with the question of the production or reproduction of the wealth that the citizens are to enjoy in common; after all, in the old order the poor, who are much more numerous than the rich, are sufficiently induced by their needs to work hard for their living, and this inducement is about to disappear with the abolition of poverty. This question is discussed in the central and shortest section (four verses) of the exchange between Praxagora and Blepyros on the new order. Praxagora's decision is to the effect that the land will be cultivated by the slaves and the women will weave the clothing; men will have nothing to do but to enjoy the fruits of the slaves' and the women's labors. Blepyros has one more question: Since no one will have money of his own, how can he pay the fines to which he may be condemned by the magistrates? Praxagora replies that there will no longer be any lawsuits. She reminds her listeners that there can no longer be lawsuits of any sort regarding property. As for lawsuits arising from assault, the punishment will consist in the deprivation of food. When she shows that owing to the abolition of private property there will no longer be gambling, Blepyros is induced to bring up still another subject, the last subject of the exchange: the new way of life as a whole. Praxagora declares that she will turn the town into a single household by abolishing all privacy, and that she will transform the courts of justice into dining halls and the tribune into a place to put drinking bowls of wine and water pots; and the list

of citizens from which hitherto jurors were selected by lot will be used for allotting seats in the dining halls. That is to say, the institutions peculiar to democracy will be abolished: The democracy will be abolished (cf. 229-32). Everyone will have food aplenty, and after dinner the old men will enjoy the most attractive girls. Bleepyros is now altogether satisfied; Chremes is silent. Praxagora must leave for the market place in order to accept the movable property that the citizens are to surrender to the city and to take care of the first common meal to be supplied this very day. She will also put an end to prostitution so that the youths will gratify respectable women, like those forming the chorus; she thus makes clear that in the new order there is no longer a prohibition against adultery. For the same reason she must prevent the cohabitation of freemen and slave girls. Bleepyros follows her in order to be admired as the she-general's husband.

Praxagora breaks with the ancient much more radically and openly than any other Aristophanean character who is concerned with the city or with ruling. There is one link between her novel order and the order preceding it: egalitarianism. Taught by the *Clouds*, we regard as the gravest of her innovations her tacit legitimation of incest between parents and children. This innovation follows from the co-operation of two premises: the transformation of the city into a single household and the substitution of conventional equality for the natural inequality in regard to age and beauty; that equality is in fact an inequality in favor of a higher right of the old and ugly. As a rule, the old cherish the ancient to a higher degree than do the young. The egalitarian premise from which Praxagora starts counteracts to some extent her willingness to go to any length in getting rid of the ancient. We must now turn to the question of what Aristophanes thinks of Praxagora's scheme.

Praxagora had spoken of the new order in the future tense. Yet, since her word is law and there is no trace of resistance to her word, the new order has now come into being or her design has been realized. Accordingly one would expect the parabasis to take place. But there is no parabasis in the *Assembly of Women*. There is also no parabasis in the only later play, the *Plutos*. It is possible that the absence of parabaseis from the only two plays that date from after Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War is due to reasons external to Aristophanes' intention and to no other reasons. In considering this question, one must however pay attention to the changes that the parabasis underwent on the way from the *Acharnians* to the *Frogs*. In the first five plays Aristophanes himself was an important

subject of the parabasis. The parabasis of the four following plays are silent about the poet. If the most important function of the parabasis is to enable the poet to speak about himself or his work, the silence about him in the parabasis of the later plays amounts to an atrophy of the parabasis, and its atrophy would naturally lead to its disappearance. We have indicated how the poet's silence about himself in the *Birds* and in the *Lysistrata* is connected with the themes of these plays;⁸⁸ as for the *Thesmophoriazusai* and the *Frogs*, it is relevant that they are the only plays obviously dealing with the fate of poets. Be this as it may, the *Assembly of Women* differs from all earlier plays not only by the disappearance of the parabasis; it also differs from all other plays by the disappearance of the character responsible for the design after what one may call with some exaggeration the middle of the play. One can not explain Praxagora's disappearance by saying that she is no longer needed since her design has been realized. The design of Dikaiopolis, for instance, is also realized in the middle of the *Acharnians*, and he is present till the end of that play. One could say that Dikaiopolis must act till the end of the *Acharnians*, since otherwise one could not know what use he will make of his private peace; yet given the unqualified public-spiritedness of Praxagora, the only question is what use the city will make of her new order.

After Praxagora and Blepyros have left, honest Chremes prepares the surrender of his movable property to the city; his slaves carry the various pieces from his house and put them on the street, where he arranges them for their transportation as if they were to march in a procession in honor of Athena. Whether Blepyros will comply with the new law we can not find out, since he is occupied with accompanying his wife. While Chremes obeys the law, another citizen appears who takes the opposite view: It is foolish to give away the fruit of one's sweat and thrift without knowing first what the whole thing means. He first refuses to believe that Chremes is set to give away his property and then denies Chremes' contention that one must obey the laws; only a fool would obey a law before he has seen whether that law is obeyed by the bulk of the citizens. Chremes can not imagine that the bulk of the citizens are not law-abiding. The dishonest man disagrees on the ground that the new law runs counter to ancestral custom, which favors taking from the city rather than giving to it. It also runs counter to the practice of the gods, or their statues, who also take rather than give. Chremes does not meet the objection that the old order is in agreement with the gods; he surely can not deny that the new law demands a complete break with age-old custom, but he acts on the view

that the law is the present law and that men are not entitled to imitate the gods' actions. His opponent draws his attention to the further facts that even according to law men are not always obliged to obey the law and, above all, that the Athenians may repeal the law establishing community of property as they have repealed so many other laws shortly after having enacted them. Chremes replies that things have changed from top to bottom: Now the women rule. He believes that the citizens will obey the new law, but must admit that if the majority refuse to hand their property over to the city, they can not be coerced into doing so. The argument of the two men is interrupted by the appearance of a herald who calls all townsmen to hurry to Praxagora, who will assign everyone by lot to a seat in one of the dining halls; all sorts of delicacies and delights for all senses await them. Chremes does not respond, but his opponent is eager to do his civic duty by complying with this command of the city. He no longer refuses to surrender his property to the city, for the refusal would cost him a splendid dinner with all its accompaniments, but he postpones that surrender. Since he thus tacitly admits his obligation to obey the law, Chremes permits him to follow his procession, but he does not permit his opponent to help carry Chremes' movables, since he might claim that he is bringing in his own property. When the scene ends, he has not yet found a device for reconciling participation in common dinners with keeping his property, but this does not prevent him from participating in the imminent common dinner. We are left wondering whether the new order regarding property will work. Chremes' compliance with the law does not guarantee general compliance. If we disregard the facts that the new law has been enacted altogether illegally and that Praxagora has provided only for tilling of the soil and weaving, and not for the other ways of producing wealth, we might expect that the majority, who hitherto had to work hard for their living, will comply with the new law and force the rest to comply; but honest Chremes surely has no interest in not working or in living at the expense of the city. He obeys the new law because he believes that it is beneficial to the city (471-72), since it promises to do away with all crime, vice, and misery (560-68). Yet it can not keep its promise if the majority does not obey it, and he does not know that the majority will obey it. Accordingly, in defending his complying with the new law against his opponent, he does not say a word to the effect that the law is in fact beneficial. His sole motive for obeying it is his belief that it is good and right to obey the law, i.e., any law, regardless of whether it is good or bad and whether the other citizens do the same or not. He is the incarna-

tion or the dupe of unqualified law-abidingness. His exchange with his opponent reminds us of the exchange between the Just Speech and the Unjust Speech, but Chremes' justice and his opponent's injustice are presented in complete abstraction from the questions regarding the gods as well as the virtues of the ancient; the law to which Chremes is unqualifiedly loyal is of merely human origin, and it is altogether novel. This does not do away with the fact that his opponent is altogether unjust: Even the foolishly just man is superior to the unjust one.

After the poet has given us an inkling of the difficulties that beset the transformation of private property into community of goods, we expect him to show how the transformation of marriage into community of men and women works. Instead he shows how the community of men and women affects people who are not yet or no longer married. More precisely, he shows how the community not of women but of men works. We suggest this explanation. Praxagora is no longer seen, and we hear only of her public activity, but apart from being the ruler of the city, she is still a woman; we can not help wondering what her fate as a woman is in her new order.

The next scene—the center of the part following Praxagora's disappearance—opens with an exchange between an old woman and a young girl. They are waiting for men, the girl for her lover and the old woman for any man. The old woman's beauty is entirely artificial, the girl's beauty is natural. Since the old woman is about to try to attract some man or draw his attention to her by singing, the girl threatens her with a countersong. She knows that while this exchange will annoy the spectators, annoyances of this kind are also amusing and fit for comedy. She appeals to the audience's delight in the amusing, as Praxagora had appealed to its delight in political innovation as such (581–87). The exuberance coming from her youth and beauty, as well as from her expectation of her lover, culminates in laughter and therefore also in her being willing to contribute her part to a laughable situation; she knows that not she but the old woman will become ridiculous. Blepyros, we recall, was afraid of becoming an object fit for comedy, for he was at that time in a most ridiculous situation (371). He has long ago ceased to be in such a situation, but the girl will soon find herself in one. From this we may infer that the new order is good for old men, and more particularly for that old man who is Praxagora's husband, and bad for young girls. Closer inspection will show that thanks to the new order Blepyros is perfectly ridiculous and perfectly happy, while the girl is perfectly unhappy and not simply ridiculous, but rather an object

of compassion to such an extent that the new order, responsible for this state of things, becomes an object of indignation.

The old woman sings to the accompaniment of a flute. She praises the wisdom of old age and experience in matters of sex as well as the constancy of the old: The old are naturally superior to the young even as regards love. Replying to her in the same manner, the girl praises the more obvious advantages of youth in the decisive respect and warns her antagonist not to be envious of young girls: Despite the new order, which was supposed to abolish envy (565), envy still persists. She reminds the old woman of the kinship between youth and life on the one hand, and old age and death on the other; the hag's sole response consists in cursing the girl. Certain that no curses can destroy her youthful bloom, the girl is more worried by her lover's delay than by the hag's curse. When a young man appears, the old woman pretends that he is her lover and that she was waiting for him, rather than for a man in general. The girl withdraws in order to show her opponent that he is her lover and is coming to her as a matter of course. The old woman has no choice but to withdraw too. The youth knows that his desire for the girl is thwarted by the new law, which compels him first to sleep with an older woman; he finds this state of things unbearable for a free man. For the old woman, however, the new law is precisely in perfect agreement with freedom, since it is in agreement with democracy, i.e., with the regime in which the free as free rule as equals, and the equality of all is brought about by a law privileging the naturally inferior at the expense of the naturally superior; or, if you wish, the requirements of freedom may have to give way to those of equality. The girl, who believes that she has fooled the older woman into staying indoors, calls on the youth to join her, which he is only too eager to do. Both pray to Eros for his help, in addition to praying to each other. While the youth is at the girl's door, the old woman reappears and makes her claim on him in accordance with the new law; the law that obliges him to satisfy her is only the reverse side of the law that entitled him to a free dinner. She quotes to him the text of the new law, according to which the old women may use force against a youth who is recalcitrant; the text as quoted by her is silent about the rights of old men; there is no way out for the youth that is not clearly against the laws, the women's laws. When he is about to give in, the girl, who is as dissatisfied with the women's laws as the youth, succeeds in freeing him from the hag's clutches by pointing out to her that she is old enough to be his mother and that the new law leads to incest between mothers and sons, i.e., is manifestly invalid. But

this victory of the girl—in the new order only females can be victorious—is of very short duration. A second hag appears, older and uglier and therefore still more privileged by the new law than the first, too old to be the mother of the youth and therefore beyond the girl's ultimate appeal; she raises her claim on the youth and drags him away. She does not play the loving woman like the first hag, who had sworn three times by Aphrodite, but merely refers to the law. At that moment a third hag, still older and uglier and therefore still more privileged than even the second, lays hold on him with the result that he is in danger of being torn to pieces by the two. The oldest hag wins out. The girl's misery is beyond words. The youth's misery is so threefold that he fears—quite wrongly, we believe—that he is by law obliged to satisfy the second hag also before he can enjoy his girl. He is not comforted by the thought that however terrible compulsory cohabitation may be, it may be of benefit to the city (cf. 471–72). In the new order Eros does not listen to the prayers of lovers. Death and decay triumph over life and bloom.

In the second scene there was complete silence about Praxagora: Does she approve of the atrocities committed or threatened by the hags? The silence of the heroine is in a way continued till the end of the play. The chief character in the last scene is a tipsy maidservant who was never before as happy as she is now. She speaks of her mistress as most blessed: Could her mistress be Praxagora? Her mistress has sent her to bring her mistress' husband to the dinner; when she meets him, she greets him as blessed and thrice happy. Blepyros could be called thrice happy, since he is the husband of the ruler of the city. Yet the maid calls him thrice happy not for this reason but because he is the only citizen who has not yet had his dinner: He is the only one who has something marvelous to look forward to. We thus learn incidentally that the community of men and women has not yet become actual: The maid's mistress and master are still husband and wife; the friendship between husbands and wives still persists. The maid also invites to the dinner the benevolent among the spectators and in particular among the judges. Her master tells her to enlarge the invitation still further and to invite the whole population to dine at home, while he will go to the public dinner. The women of the chorus too have not yet had their dinner and are therefore to come together with the mistress' husband. Perhaps what is true of these women is true also of the rest of the Athenian women who, for all we know, were busy preparing the dinner and, if the condition of the maid is a clue, drinking wine. The promised dinner is a dish of unbelievable and even

unsayable richness and variety—a manifest boast that no one believes. We are at a loss to say whether Praxagora's scheme has made the Athenians happy, if only to the extent that thanks to that scheme the whole citizenry once got a dinner at the expense of the city. The only people of whose happiness we can be certain are a slave girl and the oldest hag. The chorus owes its happiness not to Praxagora's scheme but to the anticipation of victory in the contest of comedies.

The ending of the play is unsatisfactory. We do not see whether the community of property and women works. We do not see whether Praxagora made the city as a whole happy or unhappy. In all other plays we see at the end whether the character responsible for the design that animates the action has succeeded or failed or partly succeeded, and therefore with whether and to what extent the poet approves of the design; at any rate in this sense the endings of all the other plays are satisfactory. In all the other plays we see the victory of human beings who deserve to win or of a worthy design, or the defeat of human beings who deserve to lose or of an unworthy design; or if the victory or defeat is only partial, we see to what extent they win or lose, i.e., deserve to win or lose. Bdelykleon succeeds in curing his father of his obsession with condemning men judicially, but he fails to make a gentleman out of him; Euripides fails to be completely acquitted by the women, but he succeeds in being conditionally acquitted; Dionysos fails to bring back Euripides from Hades, but he succeeds in bringing back another tragic poet. By making us see in this simple way the difference between worthy and unworthy designs, the poet teaches the just things. Yet since the designs—as distinguished from the ends by themselves, like peace—are in all cases laughable, he teaches us the just things by making us laugh. The designs are laughable because they are (more or less obviously) impossible; by making a part of the audience think about why a given design is impossible, the poet addresses the wise as distinguished from the laughers (1155–56).

Someone might say that the ending of the *Assembly of Women* is as satisfactory in the sense defined as the ending of any other comedy, since the poet has revealed his judgment on Praxagora's scheme through the most elaborate scene that he devoted to the new order in action, the scene showing the conflict between the old women and the young lovers. The scene shows that Praxagora made happy not indeed the whole city but the old women, and she made unhappy not indeed the whole city but the young lovers. In other words, she brought about, as every revolutionary does, not the abolition of misery but a redistribution of misery and happi-

ness. In the old order the hags were miserable, since they suffered from a deprivation that, if they wanted, would remain private or secret and hence decent; in the new order the hags' happiness is necessarily public and not only indecent but repulsive: Those who deserve to lose triumph. This shocking fact is only slightly concealed by the superficially exhilarating character of the final scene. The ending of the *Assembly of Women* is unsatisfactory in the sense that it is repulsive or nauseating, while the endings of all the other plays are exhilarating. It is not sufficient to say that the *Assembly of Women* is the ugliest comedy; it is *the* ugly comedy. In the *Lysistrata* the women bring the men to their senses; they cure them of a folly indeed, but not of a degrading folly. In the *Assembly of Women* the women induce or compel the men, and not the least the young men, to sacrifice all concern with the noble or beautiful for the prospect of being lavishly fed and otherwise taken care of by the women: The women's action deprives life of all beauty. One does not see how Praxagora's action can redound to the glory of Athens. The *Assembly of Women* is the only play where no significant resistance is offered by men or elements to the design informing the action; surely the beauty of victory in an open and fair fight is lacking, unless one is willing to call the quasi-arrest of the youth by the hags a victory in an open and fair fight.

One may question the premise of the preceding argument according to which in the Aristophanean comedy the character or cause that triumphs deserves to triumph and vice versa: If the hags' triumph does not mean that they deserve to triumph, it is surely less revolting than if the opposite is true. What then do victories and defeats in the Aristophanean comedies mean? Do the hags triumph merely because their triumph is more laughable than their defeat would be? Is Socrates defeated merely because his defeat is more laughable than his triumph would be? Are the lovers of peace victorious merely because their victory is funnier than their defeat would be? It is more reasonable to understand the unique character of the ending of the *Assembly of Women* in the light of the unique character of its obvious theme. The *Assembly of Women* is the only play in which the poet attacks not democratic institutions like the jury system, or policies like the war against Sparta, or demagogues like Kleon, but the very principle of democracy, egalitarianism. It is for this reason that the poet proceeds in this play, as distinguished from the plays hitherto discussed, ironically, i.e., he pretends to accept the premise that he rejects and hence presents a most objectionable consequence of extreme egalitarianism as if it were entirely unobjectionable and deserved to triumph: Under no

circumstances must the enemies of equality be allowed to triumph. He shows the consequences of egalitarianism without showing the collapse of egalitarianism. Egalitarianism calls for the abolition of all inequalities and therefore for absolute communism (communism regarding property, women, and children); yet, since the most important inequalities are ineradicable, egalitarianism requires that the inferior be given privileges in order to compensate them for their defects; their envy must be appeased. The absurdity of egalitarianism is not as palpable in the case of property as in the case of sex, since whether men are rich or poor depends as much on chance as on natural inequality. This explains why the scene between the hags and the young lovers is both so important and so unambiguous. The triumph of the hags reflects the triumph of Praxagora. It is the triumph of art over nature: Not the sun, but the lamp is Praxagora's emblem. It is because Praxagora's scheme in a sense follows from the egalitarian principle that it meets no resistance to speak of in Athens. It is because Praxagora, who has no equal in either sex, is the living refutation of egalitarianism pure and simple that she is not seen and barely heard of in the second half of the play.

Yet we must not forget that although she is an outstanding human being, Praxagora is a woman. She is much younger than her old and erotically repulsive husband. Since her new laws are meant for the sexual gratification of free women (718-20), they take care of hers too. In her new order adultery can no longer be prohibited. As we have seen, in the transitional stage between the old order and the new, the friendship between husband and wife still persists: Praxagora can always claim, if her husband agrees, that she has fulfilled her onerous duty and is therefore always free to cohabit with young men. She is much better off in the new order than before. The new order then brings about the happiness not only of repulsive hags but also of pretty young wives who are married to old men. The privilege of the hags is a kind of equivalent for what adultery was in the old order: A privilege that is admittedly unattractive takes the place of a crime; no wonder that Chremes, the champion of law-abidingness at any price, has no objection to the new order (cf. 471-72). Praxagora then has a powerful private incentive for her revolution, which necessarily, if accidentally, bestows such great privileges on old women. From what we know of Blepyros, we are entitled to assume that he in his way is as satisfied with the new order as his wife is in her way. This is not to deny that if the hags' interpretation of the new law were correct, Praxagora must gratify another old man before she can enjoy a young

one; but who can doubt that this interpretation will have to give way to the interpretation that is both fairer and more acceptable to the ruler of the city? The strange ending of the *Assembly of Women* conceals from us the private triumph of Praxagora, who surpasses by far all men and women, i.e., a deserved triumph.

Yet this deserved and exhilarating triumph is not presented, whereas the shocking triumph of the hags is presented. One may even say that since the former triumph is not seen, we can not even be certain of it. Surely, Praxagora's conjectured triumph is inexorably linked to the hags' manifest triumph. We thus become inclined to return to the view that Praxagora deserves to lose, or perhaps that while she may deserve to triumph, her scheme deserves to lose: Everything might have gone well if she had sought only her own happiness, as Dikaïopolis had done. The strange ending of the *Assembly of Women* conceals the defeat of Praxagora's scheme. Why does Aristophanes conceal that defeat? Her scheme is of incredible boldness. It is comparable in this respect to Peisthetairos' scheme. It surpasses Peisthetairos' scheme in boldness above all by what it implicitly provides in regard to incest, i.e., by not respecting a fundamental requirement of the city, while in other regards it falls short of Peisthetairos' scheme. It is surely the boldest scheme conceived by a woman. In order to see what this means in an Aristophanean context, we must pay attention to a difference, which we hitherto had no occasion to consider, between his women-plays and his men-plays. In the men-plays gods and divine things (like the divine intervention through Amphytheos, the oracles of Kleon, and the oracle given to Philokleon) are important, if not decisive, for the formation of the original or final design informing the action. Gods and divine things play no such role in the women-plays. We may also recall the women's unconcern with Euripides' atheism in the *Thesmophoriazusai*, as well as the peculiar identification of nature and law that underlies Lysistrata's scheme. However bold Praxagora may be, no one can accuse her of acting against the gods. Prometheus is a man. Crudely speaking, a higher degree of moderation (*sophrosyne*) is demanded of women than of men,⁸⁹ while the opposite is true of manliness. Let us never forget the great virgin goddesses, Artemis and Athena. By concealing the failure of the boldest scheme conceived by the most outstanding woman, Aristophanes conceals the failure of Woman, the limitation of Woman: he spares Woman. He does not need the lesson that his Euripides needed. Exaggerating grossly for the purpose of clarity, we may say that the ugliness of the *Assembly of Women* reflects the

ugliness of moderation. We do not refrain from using this harsh expression, since it is helpful for rethinking the thought to which Plato's *Phaedrus* is devoted: the praise of *mania*. Certain it is that Socrates' correction of Praxagora's scheme, which we find in the *Republic*, is not properly understood if one does not consider—against the letter of the *Republic*⁹⁰—the difference of sex between Socrates and even the wisest woman; the scheme presented in the *Republic* is altogether of male origin.

86. Cf. above, p. 228.

87. Rousseau, *Contrat Social* I 9 end; cf. *Acharnians* 718 and context.

88. Cf. above, pp. 170 and 203.

89. Aristotle *Politics* 1277^b20–23.

90. 540^e5.